

Half Life: Divergent Paths

by pricecheckgreen

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Summary: A series of one-shots in an AU based somewhat loosely on the Half-Life 2 Beta

1. Point Insertion

****I do not own any of the ideas, concepts, characters, or creatures present in the Half-Life series or its Beta-They belong to Valve.****

* * *

><p>This had to be some fever dream. Maybe he died fighting the Nihilanth and everything afterwards had been a desperate hallucination of escape. It was all too surreal to be true.<p>

â€|Gordon sucked in the stale air of the train car and accepted that this was real.

He felt disoriented, like he'd been asleep for a while and woke up in someone else's world. Except he'd just been in someone else's world. Some thing else's. This was supposed to be his world, wasn't it? But it wasn't. He swallowed and attempted to quell the onset of panic when he discovered that, instead of his protective hazard suit, he was garbed in plain denim clothes that provided no security whatsoever. All of his weapons were missingâ€even his crowbar. He was completely defenseless.

Wasn't he told that he could at least keep the suit?

The cold metal floor shook and brought him into the moment. It was in a small train car that the man in the business suit had placed him, two men farther in, one staring dismally out the window and the other nervously clutching a scuffed black briefcase. They were also wearing the denim overallsâ€perhaps it was some sort of institutional apparel. The scenery outside was dark and cloudy, the lightbulbs

overhead dim and flickering. Such low light had masked his entranceâ€”or maybe the two men believed he had always been on the train.

â€”Had he?

Cautiously, he rose to his feet, gripping a seat to steady himself as the car shook again. Wherever this was, it was certainly not Black Mesa. Perhaps there was some comfort in that. He carefully made his way forward, eyes beginning to dart about for any threat that might approach. The words of the gray faced stranger were already fading from his mindâ€”words that might've given him something to expect; he tried to hold on to what he knew and failed. There was only the now.

"I didn't see you get on," one of his fellow passengers mused, voice serene in a broken kind of way. Devoid of interest. Gordon kept quiet, and the man's low-lidded, apathetic gaze turned back to the window.

It was hard not to stumble around like a stupefied tourist. Things must have changed a lot while he wasâ€”wherever he had been. The thick, dark clouds across the sky, the imposingly tall architectureâ€”that tower in the center of town, he couldn't even see the top. It didn't look like anything human, eitherâ€”

If he hadn't been in so much shock, Gordon might have noticed that he was the only one milling around. Other citizens strode away from the station in hurried, nervous paces. The only people actually standing in place were figures in dark trench coats with ghoulish gas masks on their faces ("Civil Protection", sprung to mind as the identifying label, but no source provided itself in his memory). What were they there for? To keep people in line? They weren't there to observeâ€”there were plenty of cameras, both stationary and floating through the air, emitting soft beeps as they took pictures of the various people the train dropped off, like little sentry drones.

What a curious flight path they took. The scientist in Gordon that had been dormant for the last two days sat up and wondered how they managed to stay afloat like that, bobbing about almost aimlessly. One came in close to his faceâ€”

In precisely half of one second he was blind, listening to three clicks as it started taking his picture. He stumbled back, struggling to regain his vision, panicking. When things began to clear a little, a hand grabbed his collar and wrenched him back.

"Ah!" Still stunned, Gordon found himself windmilling a little to keep steady. It was much darkerâ€”he'd been dragged inside one of the buildings.

***"Quiet." **He hadn't been here long, but he recognized the distorted, hostile bark of the various officers around the station. Obediently, he went silent. It was what he did naturally, anyway.

The CP glanced around in the street for a second, almost like he wanted to make sure they were unobserved. Gordon started to get this sinking feeling that he was going to have to start killing again.

Damn. He glanced around the room for any blunt objects that he might be able to use. Conditions weren't ideal, butâ€

***"Alright."** The officer slammed the door shut, leaving only one bare, flickering bulb to light the room, and brought a hand up to his mask. Gordon stepped back. He wasn't readyâ€there weren't a whole lot of usable items in this room, and if it came to using his fists he was sure to lose. Maybe he couldâ€

Barney. Holy crap. "Barney?"

His dark hair was greying and there were lines on his face that hadn't been there before, but it was the same guard from Black Mesa he'd met when things went to hell.

"Well, you took your sweet time getting here, didn't you?" Barney noted, looking over his mask before setting it down. "I was wondering when you'd show up."

All the questions buzzing through Gordon's head choked his throat, and the most he could manage was some confused gibbering. Barney cocked an eyebrow and laughed. "Still a master communicator, eh Doc? Listen, save your questions for Kleiner, I'm just the security checkpoint. You have to get down to the lab before anyone with any brain cells to rub together catches on to who you are."

Gordon frowned. His brain was only processing half of this. The name "Kleiner" stuck with himâ€his mentor at MIT and superior in Black Mesa. Everything else was too confusing to process. He was in danger, thoughâ€that was clear.

"You getting' any of this, Doc?"

Gordon looked up and nodded before realizing the answer to that question was no. Barney didn't notice, maintaining his grim expression and glancing once more outside the doors.

"Alright, Kleiner's lab is through the manhack arcadeâ€you'll recognize it, a bunch of people lined up to play this sick game the Combine set up. Take a left through the nearby foundry, keep going straightâ€and try to look like you belong there. Once you're out there'll be a parking structure, go down to the third level andâ€" Harsh banging on the other side of the door. "Aw, for the love ofâ€We've got company coming, I'll try to meet you there."

"What?"

Barney fiddled with his mask, getting it back over his face. "Someone must've seen me drag you in and now they want to see what's up. Just play along, Gordon."

"_What?_"

Barney strode towards him as the sound of footsteps could be heard outside. ***"Shut up for a second."**

Hm. That was first time anyone actually had to say that to himâ€Barney socked him straight in the stomach. Every molecule of air went wheezing out of his lungs, sending him collapsing in on himself

down to the floor. Gordon had received _bullet wounds_ that hurt less. At that moment he felt like a sack of potatoes; defenseless, without any information of his surroundings, and in a _whole lot of pain_.

Light poured in, the dim and foggy kind, blocked by the shadows of two figures probably in CP attire.

***"This casual or do you need some help?"** one asked, pulling a baton-like weapon from his belt and making it spark.

***"Nah, I'm good."** Barney said, sending a swift kick to Gordon's side for good measure. World spinning, the hapless scientist just wanted to ask if Barney had gone _completely insane_. But that might make him mad. ***"Just wanted to let 'im know what he was in for."**

***"They're always so arrogant when they get off the trains."** The third one sneered.

***"Exactly. Give me a hand here."** Dizzy and trying to get his senses back, Gordon felt them hoist him to his feet, throwing the doors wide open. They tossed him forward into the cold, dead air. This time he managed to keep from kissing the pavement, fighting off the vertigo and steadying himself. He glanced back at his tormentors as he dizzily stumbled away, unable to tell which one was his friend.

***"Welcome to City 17."**

2. The Lab

At one point in time it must have been a parking structure, most of the upper levels having already broken away, crumbling under the weight of the invasion. So Alyx Vance told herself as she walked within it.

Below sea level—“or at least, it was before the sea level dropped”—the darkness and deserted concrete convinced patrolling Combine forces it wasn't worth investigation. She could walk freely here, her luminescent friend Skitch on her heels, and remember when she was younger and her father would visit the lab nearby to see her. She loved the darkness, the quietness, the knowledge of family a few buttons and coin slots away.

This wasn't a social visit, though. She breathed in the musty air and hurried on her way.

Skitch skittered around the walls on her backwards legs, baring her teeth and checking for any watchers. Alyx had already disabled the few cameras scattered about the perimeter. Not permanently of course—that would just look suspicious. No, she had to be careful make it look like the work of a dust storm—which were common enough, as it was. Taking one more precautionary glance over her shoulder, she approached an old vending machine, from before the time of The Administrator's Reserve, punched in a nonsensical coding of soft drinks and popped in 25 cents. There was a click, a soft hiss, and the machine opened for her. She turned her head and whistled for Skitch, who scrabbled ahead and slipped through.

"How the hell am I supposed to know what that looks like?" Alyx heard from inside. Barney. It figured they were still working. From what she could see, they hadn't even fully sorted through the equipment dump from last week, and the place was crowded with equipment. Most of it looked like junk, anyway, but where exactly were they supposed to dispose of it at?

"For heaven's sake, Barney! It's like a Resonance Plug, but wider with red wires out the end!"

"Gee thanks Doc, that really narrows itâ€"AAGH!" Alyx rushed through the clutter to see a man with salt and pepper hair in a dark Civil Protection trench coat climbing up a pile of machine parts and kicking at Skitch. "Goddammit Alyx, can't you knock before letting that thing in?!"

"Sorry Barney," she laughed, "C'mon Skitch, he gets enough trouble from Lamarr."

Skitch snapped at his boots once more with her hypodermic teeth before obediently falling behind her master. After a moment, still staring at her warily, Barney returned to floor level.

"Barney? Quit fooling around and find me the converter!" She heard Kleiner yell from the other end of the lab.

"_Foolin' around_?" Barney sputtered and clenched his fists. "Youâ€" "

"Hi there Dr. Kleiner!" Alyx called in the man's general direction before her friend said something he might regret later, waving a little and glancing around at the scattered equipment.

"What? â€|Oh, Alyx, is that you?" Kleiner's voice at once changed from irritation to delight. "Hello there, my dear! I'm in the middle of some calculations, so I'm afraid I can't come over there." There was a pause on his end, and his voice resumed the frustrated tone. "Speaking of which-!"

"Hold your horses, Doc! I'm lookin', I'm lookin'!" Barney started muttering under his breath and sifting through the piles of scrap again. "I swear, it's just like working at Black Mesa. 'Barney, I locked myself out of my office again', 'Calhoun, some _MIT graduate_ broke his security pass and needs a new one', 'Guard, get this door open for me, you lazy bum'" He growled under his breath and turned around to give Alyx a very exasperated look. "â€|You come over here for something?"

She nodded, frowning a bit in sympathy. "Eli's teleporter's still in the conceptual stage and I said I would help him out. I need to get a few spare parts, if you have any."

He grinned. "You sure you're not here for another bucket of red hair dye? That stuff doesn't come cheap, you know." He tapped his temple and pointed to her wild, flaming red hair. "I'm only asking because your roots are showing."

"So are yours."

He scowled and inclined his head to where their own teleporter was being made. "Kleiner should know where the important stuff is. Unless he needs me to find it, which is what's been going on all day. Then you're out of luck."

Alyx nodded and started to maneuver around everything taking up space in the floor, carefully making her way over. The lab didn't usually look so much like a junkyard. If she used her imagination she could recognize the security consoles she had hacked the cameras through once, the HEV repair system, and maybe even the floor tiles under the dim lights and scrap.

The area around the teleporter, which looked like a large, steel can with a slot in the front to see through, was surprisingly clear. Kleiner was writing on a weathered clipboard, frown lines creasing his aged face. He seemed to have lost more of his thin, grey hair since she'd last seen him.

"Hey, Dr. Kleiner, you got a sec?" Alyx asked, stepping carefully down next to him.

"In a second, Alyx," he said, waving her off and adjusting his glasses. "I have an idea and I need to write it down or else I'll lose it completeâ€"oh fie. Where is Barney with the converter?!"

"He's looking, Doc. Maybe you should cut him some slack, I'm sure things are pretty stressful for him right now."

Kleiner just shook his head. "Things are stressful for all of us, all of the time."

"It's honestly more for your health than his."

He sighed. "Very well. I justâ€"I swear it's just like working at Black Mesa. Honestly, do you know how long he would take getting my office open whenever I locked myself out? I couldn't get any work done!"

"If you say so." She glanced back. Barney had just tossed a piece of machinery across the room. "Listen, I need a component or two so Dr. Maxwell can get working on his teleporterâ€"|"

"Ah, is it the spectral analysis table? He was asking about it earlier, I dug one out just in case. It should be on the table over there." Kleiner, already back to his notes, gave a vague, distracted wave over in the general direction of the left wall. Alyx gave it a good once over and stared at Kleiner.

"Uhâ€"|What table?"

"What? Why, the one overâ€"|" Kleiner paused. "Right. I keep forgetting we have yet to clear the mess. It's under the rubble somewhere. I'll get Barney on that."

3. Eli's Place

****Not too sure about the quality of this one, but I have other ideas I want to explore without getting too caught up in rewriting it,**

So... **

* * *

><p>The night out in the wasteland was bizarrely peaceful, in its own way.<p>

Small dust storms blew across the brown, cracked earth and whistled through its passages. Antlions skittered away in the distance, chittering and digging their mile long underground nests. Searching, crooning Combine synths swung low over the terrain, waving spotlights along the ground for anything out of the ordinary, such as any remaining rogue military facilities, unaccounted for Xen wildlife, or even a ragtag guerilla group of subjugated humans prowling the remains of what had once been their countryside.

Now, the gaudily painted junkyard monstrosity that had the name "DOG" spray-painted in bright yellow along the back of its chassis did not look like any of these thingsâ€"except, perhaps, a mechanical version of the homophone "gorilla". But nonetheless, it ducked out of the light when the mechanized creature came its way, and only returned to its delivery functions when the sky was clear again.

DOG was, much like its master, not much to look at. At a glance, it seemed like both of them were falling apart at the seams, perhaps composed of parts too worn down, or maybe not even constructed properly from the very beginning. It was not unusual to dismiss either out of hand, or balk at introductions and instead focus on those that bothered to make themselves more presentable (or at least, as presentable as one could get in the last decade or so). Being ignored was, in fact, a fundamental aspect of the two's existence.

They were also alike in that they were very good at what they did, whether it had to do with making advanced equipment with old trash or tearing apart Combine soldiers, and that overlooking them because of superficial features such as asymmetrical design, a scruffy, unwashed appearance and a questionable aesthetic was not only shallow but also fairly stupid to boot.

But Eli Maxwell didn't mind, and DOG didn't even care. If the doctor overly concerned himself with the opinions or companionship of his colleagues, it certainly wasn't reflected in his choice of lab location, set out in a hovel in the outskirts of City 17 where only those on the run dared to go.

It did concern him, however, that there hadn't been many refugees led his way in a while.

No matter.

At the moment he was waiting for DOG to return from its scavenging with the supplies he needed to begin work on the teleporter. He'd hit a roadblock in several other projects for similar reasons, such as the Zero Point Energy Field Manipulator, and was very eager to resume productivity. After all, the last time Calhoun had dropped by he'd mentioned that Kleiner had already begun construction on his own "resurrected teleport", and having a quick, unnoticeable transfer systems for refugees would be a great boon to liberation efforts.

And no, he didn't need Captain Vance to tell him that.

D0G often took a long time to look for what he needed, and so Eli found many of his hours alone. Sometimes he would spend his time looking at the outside world through the sole window in his little hole in the ground, the various signs of life amidst an otherwise dead world. Sometimes he would prep little introductory slide shows for liberated peoples who might not have been fully apprised the Earth's situation.

This time, he sat and stared at the damaged, weather beaten photo of his wife he'd salvaged from Black Mesa, thinking and occasionally running a hand through his thick, greying beard. His leg had been giving him trouble again. That, and he'd been getting too old.

>There had been so much, before the accident. So many things in their future together, so many discoveries to be made. She'd even broached the topic of raising a family together. Now, he lived in a hole in the ground with nothing but memories and resistance work.<p>

Thuds reverberated through the roof over his head, and he sat up straight. The briefest course of panic shot through his system before the careful knocking pattern echoed on the metal entrance gate, and was swallowed by relief. D0G was back.

He reached for his cane, managing with great effort to get to his feet and hobble over to the makeshift garage door opener he'd fashioned for himself. The old machinery groaned and protested, but eventually the way was open.

"Well don't just stand there, boyâ€"we don't want to draw eyes, do we?" The automaton nodded its three piece head and shuffled back a little while he opened the entrance for it.

D0G, having only one, large red eye to see through, as usual overshot its target. Instead of just making its way over all of the equipment in the lab, it collided with the makeshift lounge area, hitting a radio set and crashing into a couch made almost entirely with duct tape.

The radio was smashed to pieces. The couch was, of course, completely undamaged.

"_D0G."_ Eli limped over, feeling the plastic prosthetic under his right knee creak under the strain of his weight as he walked and pulling up his goggles to inspect the mess. "What did I tell you about being careful in the house?"

D0G made a low, defensive whoop as it righted itself, hanging its head like it used to back when the body was only about knee-high and it looked more like a standard canine form. It shook its back and shifted so that the bag full of components was in easy reaching distance, baring it like a peace offering. Eli laughed. He leaned over and slipped the bag off of D0G's frame, taking a minute to glance at the contents before setting it down in the general lab space.

"Come sit with me, D0G," he said, "I feel like an old man today." He hobbled to the couch as the robot tilted the duct taped mess back

into a sitting angle, running a hand over the scanner scrap head as he passed. D0G didn't really get the finer points of human nostalgia and mourning, but nonetheless it obediently took a place at Eli's side, sitting on the floor by his feet and examining the cracks in the cave ground. He thought about work and family and what, precisely, he was going to complete by tomorrow morning.

An insistent beeping broke his reverie, and he glanced over to see that a call was coming in. Most likely, it was Barney announcing that they were sending another escaped citizen his way. It gave him some degree of surprise, then, that when D0G went to adjust the antenna so a picture could come through he instead saw the golden, bobbed hairstyle and sharply featured face of Helena Mossman staring back at him.

"Dr. Mossman!" He got up from where he was sitting and moved in view of his camera. "This is, well, unexpected."

"Dr. Maxwell. Figured I'd check in." Her voice, already somewhat sharp and cold, was amplified by the way his speakers played the receiving sound, so that it felt somewhat more like he was conversing with a particularly human robot rather than a coworker. "Dr. Kleiner just sent me some specs covering his progress on his in-city resurrected teleport, and since Iâ€"weâ€"have just finished running some preliminary tests on our own over at Kraken base, I thought I'd ask about how you're coming along."

"Oh, really? Well, that was sweet of you," he teased, watching her frown and purse her lips in response. "I've had some trouble with equipment, so things are slow, but they could be worse."

"â€|Yes, I imagined you might have some difficulty, what with the conditions of yourâ€|lab." Interestingly, she seemed to be making an effort to mask the disapproval in her voice for Eli's living conditions, before clearing her throat. "I could always send someone out there, for supplies."

"Oh no, no, that won't be necessary. I sent D0G out for what I needed. I'm sure I have much to do, but I have enough to get started."

Her eyebrows creased in a disapproving manner all too familiar to anyone that had to work with her. "If you have the parts, I would expect you to start progressing _immediately_. The chain's not going to be ready to use if we're missing a link, yes?"

"Oh, I'll get to it. Just feeling a bit lazy and sentimental right now, you know?"

Mossman started to speak, paused, and then her tone softened somewhat and lost the edge of imperiousness. "â€|You don't have to stay out there alone, you know."

Eli forced a laugh. She always had this tendency to go off topic. "I'm not alone. I've got D0G with me."

"Machines don't count." D0G made an offended intonation and she rolled her eyes. "When's the last time you've actually talked to somebody in person?"

"I'm _fine_." He waved away her concerns, shaking his head. "You don't need me over at Kraken labs; I'd only get in the way. Besides, _someone_ has to hold this position, and since I'm already here it may as well be me."

She sighed, and he could tell he was getting her frustrated. "Look, justâ€¦If you ever change your mindâ€¦"

"I'll call you." Eli leaned over and flicked the communications power switch. "Goodbye, Helena."

The silence encompassed the room as DOG shifted out of position at the antenna. The lights were low because of the power draw that the video array had created, and didn't return to full brightness for a few minutes more.

He always knew when he was in too depressed a mood when other people miles away could rightfully call him out on it. That was just one of the pitfalls of spending long hours with no human contact prepping machinery and running algorithms. The same thing had happened in Black Mesa, back when the facility wasn't just a crater in New Mexico. The best remedy that he'd found was workâ€¦but that only seemed to exacerbate the problem in his off hours.

It seemed an odd thing to think about with the state of the world taken into account. Nonetheless, Helena had a point. It wouldn't do much good to sit around, moping. Besidesâ€¦

Kleiner would never let him hear the end of it if he got his teleporter working first.

Eli grinned, pulled on a pair of goggles, and got started.

4. Citizen Life

It's always dark in City 17.

That was one of the things you learned, like walking and working and going to the food shelter every day for rations. Even when the sun was trying to shine through the diseased, cloudy atmosphere, it was always dark in City 17.

The buildings were dark, like warped, decayed gothic architecture, faded graffiti and posters with black, brown and orange only. Trash littered the streets, old newspapers and squashed tobacco. The police were dark, features obscured with grey gas masks, eyes hidden with shiny, pitch colored lenses and bodies swathed in black trench coats. The people were dark, faces overcast in black denim uniforms, holding all of what they were inside themselves and leaving none of it in confirmation to others of their own humanity. Even the train on the way in was dark, speeding through scenes of cracked desert and poisoned, inky sea water, the interior lights dim and flickering while people coughed and died on just the other bench.

But all that was fine because Lauren's eyes had already adjusted to the lack of light.

Her legs hurt, but she had to keep walking. It was too close to curfew for her to feel safe, she needed to be back in her apartment

with the blinds pulled and every potential area where a camera could be hidden blocked with furniture. She'd be there right now if her roommates hadn't voted her on food duty for the night. It wasn't usual to go on ration runs so late—they'd actually gotten their daily meals in the morning, and Lauren had woken up extra early to get something at least somewhat edible before everyone else took it. A teen that slept in the bathtub in their little communal group was the source of the problems. Moron had been giving his share of the rations to a girl down the hall for the past week, and passed out from hunger two hours ago.

She had never gone for seconds before, and was all nerves. Citizens weren't allowed to get more than their allotted share, but some people set up little smuggling systems to get black market goods (such as extra food, water that wasn't drugged, toilet paper) into the city to those that wanted it. Sometimes Civil Protection cracked down on them, and sometimes they didn't get caught. She hoped she wouldn't be caught. She'd been cracked down on enough for the week.

For a moment she was afraid that running the directions around in her mind while trying to go unnoticed around closed bars and vandalized clubs had been a waste of time, but she let out a small sigh of relief when she saw the little sheets of paper plastered around the street corner she'd just passed.

You could tell where you were in the city based on the posters displayed at the various bulletin cluster points. In the apartment complex it was mostly Civil Protection ads—basically that you could get out of that hellhole you called a home and get a real life so long as you were willing to beat your fellow human being into oblivion every other day to keep them in line. And that if you weren't interested, you had to obey the ones that were. The industrial district featured a lot of pieces that involved death—small notices on safety dwarfed by tips on how to work around the dead bodies and proper disposal of corpses. Featured prominently in this particular piece of propaganda was a tall, green uniformed, gangly limbed creature with stark white skin and a long gun in its grip, head like a soccer ball with two cold, beady black eyes staring out at the prospective viewer. In all caps, the italicized text said "KEEP IT CLEAN—OR HE WILL."

Rather than making vague, silly sounding threats, it probably would have been more effective to just say, "Cremators burn garbage and don't care if you happen to be in the fire radius and get all of your skin melted off". Not to mention how the dark colors made it almost impossible to see the creature the poster was trying to display in first place. The whole thing could have been better made if the Combine had bothered to find a turncoat with any compositional sense. And anyone with two brain cells to rub together didn't need a scary picture to know who was in charge anyway.

But that was just Lauren's opinion. She wouldn't tell anybody. You couldn't just mention your feelings offhand to the first person you saw.

Regardless, that meant she was going in the right direction.

But she hated the industrial district. She hated everything about it. Particularly since the factories were responsible for the Synths,

a bizarre combo of unearthly looking creatures and machine that tended to menace people so they knew it was an alien superpower in charge and not your typical human dictator.

Ironically enough, the factory with the most amount of deaths was the one that made the Cremators. Small, dusty footprints could be seen going in and out of the main door, but they'd probably released the children for the day. She wouldn't have to worry about actually, well, _seeing _any of them. The building was completely papered over with more posters, probably to cover up the ill-advised, poorly spray-painted lambda graffiti that someone put up on their fifteen minute lunch break. Making sure to look both ways to assure herself that there wasn't a cop on patrol nearby, she slipped inside, lingering embers bathing everything, like the hellish machinery lining the assembly line and the black bins filled with heads and torsos, in a dim, demonic light.

In the dead stillness, the lone figure off in the corner in charge of the "black market room" stood out like a flickering flame. Jumpy kid—and she wasn't using the term loosely, it was a slim twelve year old with half his hair burnt off and a couple packages of rations behind his back, looking every direction but hers and probably being as conspicuous as possible. She almost had to stop and speak up, but he spotted her before she worked up the nerve and gave a quick wave.

"I-I told 318 that people were coming. He wanted to join the other kids and play Manhack Panic instead." His voice cracked, probably going through puberty, and she felt an odd mix of pity for him and revulsion—at the fact that the children were in factories or that the little numbered monsters went to the Manhack arcade after being let out, she wasn't sure which. "I'm glad I'm right. I said I'd stay here at my post."

"Well, I would recommend not being so obvious next time." Lauren muttered, glaring at her feet. "CPs are age-blind."

"I—I know. I'm sorry. I wanted to stay here."

"Of course you did." She pulled a small watch out of her pocket. "Will this cover a pack? We didn't have much, guy in my building needs food."

The kid took the timepiece and looked it over, pressing it to his ear to see if he could hear it tick. "Does it have batteries?"

"I think it's windup."

He took a moment to think about it, and begrudgingly handed her one lumpy grey bag. "If you really need it."

"I do, thank you." She glanced around nervously, wanting to terminate the conversation and just leave. "Uh—"

"What?"

"—Nothing." Lauren turned heel and stalked off, clutching the rations to her chest like it was a bomb. There was an entire other half to the trip to take care of and now she was holding on to _contraband_. She took a deep breath, a quarter of it smog, coughed

and crept through the exit, trying very hard to remember which way she'd come in as it was now close to pitch black outside.

* * *

><p>The end of the day was not going well. There was nobody left out and her surroundings didn't flare in her short term memory as having been her path before.<p>

Which way was she supposed to go now? Right? Or was should she have turned around at the Vortigunt in shackles sweeping cans off the concrete?

A sharp, bitter tone went reverberating through the street, and she picked up her pace. The stop had put her off her schedule, and now she was running late for the curfew, andâ€|

She was lost.

Oh god.

She'd lived in the city for three years and had no idea where the hell she was now. There had been a wrong turn back there somewhere, and now she was whirling bemusedly through the run-down downtown thinking of just hiding in a condemned bar until sun-upâ€then a figure in a long trench coat with a sizzling baton illuminating its thickly gloved fist approached her from a broken streetlamp. The blood in her veins turned to ice, pinpricks of fear networking through her back and gut.

It was probably the gas mask. Each Civil Protection officer wore one, twisted and distorted like alien faces, emotionless, set, hostile. A human voice couldn't even make it through the breathing apparatusâ€there was nothing redeeming in their looks, anything comforting or remotely familiar hidden beneath the uniform.

The radio filter on his belt sputtered, and then the voice came through, a tinny, grating drone that was almost incomprehensible for the sheer amount of noise. "***It's past curfew.***"

Her brain started to run at 500 miles a minute, and her mouth had extreme difficulty catching up. "I-I-I-I know, I-I got lost, some-someone stole my food and I had to run allâ€all over town to get it backâ€"

"***Could you identify this person if prompted?***"

Lauren's heart stopped, and she forced her jaw to moveâ€no sound came out. He was mocking her, of course he didn't believe her, "I-I didn't get a good look at them, bu-utâ€| " The terror smothered her voice. Stupid stupid stupidâ€|

The metrocop took a single step forward, and Lauren found herself bolting away as fast as her legs could carry her, consequences be damned. Air quality being what it was, she came to a stop with her body crying out for more oxygen only just off the corner in a back alley, but when she looked, the figure was gone, and she had made it with her extra pack of rations. She took care that her victory exhalation was nice and slow, and crept through the shadows back to where she thought was the residential district.

A grin broke over her face unannounced. There was no reason whatsoever to feel so proud of herself for running away, but the fact was that she was bruise free and had gotten away with getting extra food. What's more, she recognized her surroundings now. She'd stumbled into a space between two old restaurants, a familiar, scuffed dumpster marking the pathway back to the her living area. Keeping close to the crumbled brick, the sound of her weathered shoes on the cement destroyed her personal sense of covertness, but there wasn't likely to be anybody who could see her.

Unless the CP was still trailing her somewhere, and she'd just missed him when she'd looked for him. Lauren held on to the rations a bit more defensively, like it was some kind of shield and would protect her from anything that would do her harm. A shadow stood in the corner of her eye, but wasn't there when she turned her head.

The residential district was a mass of apartments crammed together, like a whole block just for barracks. They weren't really homesâ€”most of those were outside, broken down and scattered like Lincoln logs. These were more stable, but colder. Almost everything had to be cleared out to make space for all the people living there, most of the furniture in the rooms, all the trees on the sidewalks. She'd overheard some people refer to it as like a safe zone, away from cameras on street corners and with some hope of not getting harassed by thugs-though Civil Protection regularly made apartment raids to root out people suspected of being in the "resistance". It didn't feel safe to her.

After a moment, she spotted her street number. Somebody had added a new piece of graffiti to the enclosure wall while she was gone, a single dove flying out of the darkness, and someone else had taken the trouble to scratch it up almost beyond recognition. If there was something positive to say about her neighborhood, it was that it functioned like a living canvas, lots of voices rising up to be heard and lots of batons or shivs getting readied to break them down. Disappearances were common, although not as much as the vanishing rate for anybody who had just dropped off the train.

But these thoughts depressed her. She just wanted to get inside her building, self-anesthetize with some Administrator's Reserve and slip into oblivion.

Pausing at the door, she fumbled in her denim pockets before remembering that they didn't use keys anymore. The ID camera gave three quick flashes while she presented her exhaustion worn, scar crossed face, and the lock clicked open. When she came in, popped a loose quarter in the vending machine for the only drink anybody was able to get now, the smears of blood on the walls and floor the color of coffee stains didn't quite register into her mind until she noticed, getting into the large community room, that the unconscious teenager was gone and everyone else's faces were just a little more dismal than usual.

She was so tired. The pack of food hit the table like a sack of moldy potatoes and she stole a mattress for herself while the others tried to get the plastic open with their gnawed off nails. None of her dreams stayed with her in the morning.

* * *

><p>Lauren felt the city, sometimes, creeping under her skin, pushing under her eyelids while she slept. It was impossible to push away or define, and encompassed more than just the population inside its walls. It felt like a pollution of the spirit, or maybe some kind of encroaching psychosis.<p>

Her roommates were always the first ones awake. Usually it was the kid that shook her shoulder until she forced her eyes open, but he was, unfortunately for her, gone. So. She slept in.

Nobody bothered to wake her up before they leftâ€"she supposed they just forgot, and so she was in bed for half of the day. It wasn't like there were any warm, hopeful rays of light to filter through the window and tell her body it was time to stop producing melatonin and get the hell up. The only reason she did at all was because in the middle of the day she was introduced to a cold, unforgiving floor that almost cracked her head open because the mattress was so tall. She took it as a sign and stumbled to her feet.

Somebody had taken her can of drugged up water while she was asleep. Now she was thirsty and had a massive headache, and several times on the way downstairs she found herself smacking against the wall. There were still some stragglers lagging behind everyone else, heading along on their little daily paths, and she followed the flow of people to avoid losing herself againâ€"invariably, this led her to City 17's center just off the train station.

It wasn't really the center of the cityâ€"that would be a few blocks over, at the base of the Citadel. It was just that this was the place everyone seemed to congregate, where new arrivals came and long-time dwellers went to think. All streets converged on this spot, a large circle of buildings and benches around a pedestal and a statue.

The statue in the middle of the circle was, of course, of the Administrator, the self-professed leader of the city and overall turncoat. She wasn't entirely sure who the man was, really. The white marble was so crudely carved it could have been anybody, although it was made with him wearing some kind of office suit with a loose lab coat, so everyone could tell he was a scientist. Funny, the emphasis on more intellectual figures in a place that amounted to a concentration camp. Lauren suspected that he didn't actually existâ€"that many of the things they were told about the world today were outright fabrications. But she couldn't remember anything before that train on the way in, so who was she to say? They had made her forget. She was a rat in a box.

Well. At least she knew she was in the plaza.

It would be nice if there were as glaringly obvious landmarks in the rest of the city.

It wasn't as if she had much to do except broodâ€"unlike some people, she hadn't bothered to go out and get a job yet. She suspected she had at other cities, but clearly her employment hadn't lasted long. Besides, they lived at best on a token economy, meant to give an illusion of autonomy, but it didn't really matter whether you did anything or not, you would still get the same amount of food every morning. The only thing that counted was how good you were at keeping your head down. So that's what she did. Just sat herself down at a

cold bench at the base of that statue and fiddled around with her cracking fingers. She liked to think she was one of those people that new arrivals spied as they stumbled out from the scanning stations where they were checked for anything remotely resembling free will, an omen of how terrible life was here. She'd watch for sinking spirits until noon, and then maybe look for something to eatâ€

Her muscles froze. One of the Civil Protection officers screening people coming off the train was aiming that mask of a face directly where she was sitting, lenses lightless. She thought of last night, of running away, her blood became ice cold.

There was a lull in drop-offs. He was coming her way. She stood up, legs tensing. Oh no, no no no no noâ€

Hey-

At the first syllable her mind shut off and she ran. This had to be the same one. There was no other reason to approach her. None at all. He was going to pull her off to a deserted room somewhere, wanted to have a "talk" with a stun stick and his boots.

His footsteps, heavier than hers, pounded against the pavement after her. Nobody cared, this wasn't a strange occurrence. One or two CPs even seemed to consider joining the chase, before deciding that it wasn't worth it to get thrown off their patrol for one scared little rabbit. Lauren was alone.

Oh, but she had always been alone.

Somehow her path led her off to the industrial district again. It might be just because there were less people and she didn't have to worry about hitting them, but she regretted it. There weren't a lot of places to go in a hurry with all the machinery and factories taking up so much room. And it wasn't like she was going to remember any routes from last night.

Although she did end up ducking into the Cremator building, operational in all of its horrifying glory. The hellfire of the smelting stations licked at her heels while the children worked, oblivious to her presence like the little drones they were. She needed out, where was the exit? WHERE WAS THE EXIT?

She'd been cat-and-moused before, but never for an actual offense. She'd watched people who were attacked for doing things they shouldn't. If they didn't die from the initial bout of "subduing", they got dragged off to interrogation chambers. If they, somehow, survived whatever went on in there, rumor had it that they were taken to the Air Exchange to beâ€|processed.

Not really a rumor. Metrocops would brag about it to passing civilians every day.

Lauren didn't want to be one of those people that got processed.

The factory exit door beckoned, and she sprinted through. She could run away. Try to join the resistance. Get a new name. Move? Kill herself? Find a deep hole somewhere. Ideas, fears, everything going racing in a disorderly tangle of her mind like an influx of a drug

rush, she careened into a tall figure at the end of the line and crashed to the ground, catching glimpses of a round white head with beady black eyes. A long, dark green trenchcoat with stick thin, pasty white arms bringing a large gun up to fire for the first time in its miserable, short life.

She snatched the Immolator out of its hands and rounded about for an enemy that hadn't reached her yet. Her heart thudded from somewhere at the bottom of her sternum. She didn't think she'd ever held a firearm before. The weight was uncomfortable and the thing stank of other people's suffering. It wasn't suited to her handsâ€"that's what she was thinking as she stumbled away from the Cremator still reeling from its empty fingers, radio static and directional demands starting to come up from inside the industrial center. The first way that looked like it didn't lead to a dead end, she took it.

Was she crazy? Had she lost her mind? There was no conceivable way she was getting out of this and going back to normal. Why had she reacted so badly? _It probably wasn't even the same officer._

Nevermind. She was running out of this mess. Lauren picked a direction and stuck with it, the sounds of habitation and factories slowly being replaced by an alien, almost imperceptible hum of silence that she only tended to notice in her nightmares.

In an ordinary day, this street led to a garbage plot-just a place for people to toss in litter, or officers to toss in nonessential contraband like toys or leaflets, and burn it into the heavens. It didn't seem very environmentally sound, but there was a whole tower specifically for polluting the air somewhere, so this was small change by comparison. Today wasn't ordinary, and it wasn't just because in the span of ten minutes she'd lost all hope for status quo and was probably being written up as a fugitive even as she gasped and attempted to regain her breath. There was something wrong-a shadow where it shouldn't have been, something mismatched and out of place, a gaping hole in her vision almost floating above the junkyard. It wasn't waiting for her, she didn't think, it was-maybe it was observing something else?

What she saw was â€"well itâ€"it wasâ€"

It was like heat on a sidewalk in the summer, lines of curved light radiating off the pavement, except it wasn't a sidewalk, and there was no warmth at all. Maybe a better comparison would be some kind of vacuum, tugging things into it, but that didn't seem good enough because it had a form. It was â€"a shadow, pulling at her mind and jarring loose a painful babble of thoughts and memories. And it _looked _at her as she, insignificant bug she was, drew its attention, but she wasn't sure if it was a face. Something in her was saying it was. Her eyes said it wasn't.

Lauren frowned, worked her jaw, trying to make sense of the distorted space she was looking at, that she had stumbled upon so suddenly. Her grip on the Cremator's gun was weak, a sense of shock rooting her feet in place. She couldn't even tell what it was doing-like by the very fact of it existing, this thing was doing something so impossible and mind-warping that all other activities it happened to be engaged in were irrelevant.

The shadow cleared its throat and adjusted its tie.

"Well. This is rather unfortu-nate, isn't it?"

But maybe that phrase had just been false memories and the dead air compounded with her sudden blankness, though it did feel a little bit like there was a voice of some kind whispering in her mind about what she was doing while the thoughts in her head started to spill out of her ear.

She felt her arms move, but none of the impulses in her brain that should have accompanied them. It wasn't like operating under puppet strings at all—the movements were fluid, they felt correct, but none of it came from her mind, she had to guess the direction the gun was spinning and not automatically know, didn't recoil when the barrel rested up against her temple. Her eyes developed tunnel vision, everything blacking out again, a deeper darkness that didn't even let you look—everything but that gun was very far away, even her own self. Her blind hands fumbled for the trigger at the sound of approaching footsteps, and that Immolator was the last thing she saw.

Funny. Concentration-camp like conditions aside, she hadn't been planning to kill herself today.

The very last thing she heard was the whoosh of the flames and the pursuing Civil Protection Officer calling her name while her skin melted away from her cracking skull.

* * *

><p>I know canon-wise Lauren's just a post-it note in Barney's locker, but she's kind of turned into a full-blown character for me. Much of that's restrained to the canon-verse, though. I'm not sure precisely what's different here aside from the fact that the two hadn't been dating for as long before the Cascade hit. And she's kind of mean. Meaner, anyway.

5. Antlions and Alyx

A sharp, screeching hiss broke through the silence of the glowing grub lit subterranean tunnels. Gordon jerked, spun around and ended up blasting a hole in the antlion trailing behind him with his shotgun, yellow bug guts splashing over the ground.

He cringed and gritted his teeth, trying to get his hands to stop shaking. They were dead still anytime he needed to use them in a pinch, but once a twitchy trigger finger was a detriment to how well he could function in a situation he was all nerves. His ears were still ringing from the last two shots. Grumbling to himself, he pulled the squishy, spherical sac from his makeshift belt and gave it a quick squeeze.

Nothing for a minute, then another hiss and Gordon ended up with a second batch of gore on the walls.

"Goddammit."

He made sure to set the shotgun on the ground before calling in more

reinforcements. When the antlion arrived, he still managed to reflexively whack it with his crowbar and flinch back, but the dumb thing just stood there and looked up at him expectantly, the area directly left of its eye dented and one antenna slightly crooked.

It should have saddened him somewhat that destruction was his first response when confronted with something strange and alien. As a scientist he'd always identified with the poor sap in cheap sci fi films that wanted to keep the creature alive and study it, maybe try to learn its language or understand where it came from. The reality was that his survival instincts had turned him into a killing machine. And most of him was actually perfectly fine with that, too, because it kept him alive and it kept his priorities in order. Generally his transformation into a fauna leveler was only a pain if it led to being laughed at by Alyx Vance.

When they'd first met out in the Wasteland she'd seemed so awed, to see him. Just like everyone else he'd encountered since touching down in this Orwellian apocalypse. Gordon hadn't given it another thought, only focusing on the task at hand and giving her the briefest of acknowledging nods for her help. After they were separated in Traptown he hadn't expected to see her again, now used to most of the people he met dying after their introductions, after he'd gotten used to them following behind him. But at the end of the line, there she'd been, covered in blood and scrapes with more ammo than he'd managed to reserve and a welcoming grin on her face. He'd been a little awed to see her, too.

A list had started forming in his mind of all the people he felt comfortable believing in since the accident, a short, highly exclusive one, and she'd made her way on there without even trying.

So it damaged his pride a bit when she made fun of him back at the checkpoint for throwing tactics out the window and barreling through hordes of antlions to get there. Evidently, subtlety and manipulation was the common strategy for these creatures, and she'd laughed, handing him the pheromone control pod and snickering when he stared at it in his palm cluelessly. He'd dealt with a lot of alien weapons of warfare that could be used by human beings at Black Mesa—but it wasn't like he'd majored in xenobiology and could understand these things by sight.

According to her he liked doing things the hard way. It was more that nobody had told him there was an easier one to begin with.

He glanced back at his chittering, damaged companion. Maybe it was everyone else that did things the hard way.

The tunnel widened into acid carved caverns, and he gripped his gun protectively. The engineer antlions were controlled by a different set of chemicals, and he didn't feel like having his head melt off just yet. He could hear them skittering with their thin, hard legs somewhere nearby, and crouched by the wall, listening.

There were two, maybe more. He didn't like his odds then. One was manageable—as long as he made sure its spit hit his suit, and not his sadly unprotected face, then no real damage would be done. But a second could fire while he was distracted, and the over spill might be too much.

Without a second thought, he peeled off a piece of the pheromone pod and lobbed it over the wall at the working insectoids, sending his follower off in a frenzy. While the smooth white monsters grappled with their speckled, fragmented brother, Gordon sprinted for an adjacent tunnel where he could continue out of range. He went unnoticed over the hissing, spitting, and finally, crunching, that echoed off the walls.

Sacrificial lion, as it were.

Oh, perhaps there was _some_ benefit to thinking in a combat situation. At least his fear had numbed enough to make it possible. A part of him wondered if Alyx ever felt that kind of terror, that ate away at your mind and stomach while the world was falling down around you. It didn't seem like it. She planned ahead, smiled far too often, laughed too much.

Two more big bugs burrowed in behind him like obedient attack dogs. He gave them a passing glare and continued on.

If he had to be precise, he hadn't quite come to an opinion on her yet. She was inscrutable, like most human beings. Easily impressed but prone to making fun of him, cheerful but grim when she thought he wasn't looking, competent and experienced but deferring to his abilities whenever possible, talkative but always on topics that deflected attention specifically away from herself. She had buffed piercings in her left eyebrow and dyed red hair and a coat so patched with tape that you couldn't tell it was lined with fur. She'd said something about particle storms that almost made him laugh out in the Wastes and even let him have a go at the Gravity Gun when Dr. Maxwell offered it up for her to take along.

Ah, well. Opinion formed, then. Gordon liked Alyx.

Now he just needed to know in _what_ particular fashion he liked her and he'd be all set.

The texture of the tunnel walls changed from dark and acid worn to white and smooth as he made it into a larger cavern, the incongruity snapping him from his thoughts. The two antlions skuttled around the entrance, as if they were afraid to enter or just expected him to turn aroundâ€”a very bad feeling began to settle in his chest.

He flicked on his suit's flashlight to get a better look in the dim lighting, the different walls appearing to be part of some large outcropping in the center of the room. There were rolls of rock over its shape, a marble pattern that stretched up into the darkness of the ceiling. The material seemed almost translucent, actually, lines and shapes vaguely visible under the surface. Curiosity overwhelming his sense of caution, he reached out a gloved hand and pressed a palm over the strange substance.

It squished slightly.

â€|This was an organic structure.

The world around him rumbled and roared, and Gordon let out a soft growl.

This was why he didn't do stealth.

End
file.